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News

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What does a cool city look like? In a recent survey of Cooley Law School students, only 3.9 percent named Lansing. They missed street vendors, plants and trees, foot traffic after 5 p.m., restaurants, groceries and shops. They pointed to Ann Arbor or Grand Rapids as places that took urban revitalization more seriously □ places that Lansing could learn from.

Urban sprawl is the reason 95 percent of Lansing's business no longer takes place in the old downtown center, but in suburbia, and why opening a store downtown has become an immediate struggle. This is the expert opinion of community planner Mike Wyckoff, one of the authors of Gov. Jennifer Granholm's recent land use report.

Wyckoff, who is also president of the Planning and Zoning Center, a Lansing public policy think tank, remembers how downtown Lansing began to die during the late 1970s, when wealthier residents moved to the suburbs, and the

commercial life left with them. Between 1990-2000 the demographic of 20- to 34-year-old residents declined by 17,300. Today not even another new mall could harm downtown, says Wyckoff: "Because there are too few businesses left."

Urban sprawl has also led to a dramatic loss of green space. Most of the land around Lansing and East Lansing is developed, which makes it difficult for outdoor lovers and children to hike and play and find trails to run on.

According to the U.S. Census of Agriculture, Greater Lansing lost 27 square miles of farmland between 1987 and 1997. That's practically the size of the entire city of Lansing (which is 33.9 square miles).

Interestingly, Lansing and Ann Arbor have had the same ratio of land loss in comparison to population density. In both cities, land consumption has been twice the rate of population size between 1960 and 1990 (in Grand Rapids this was 3:1).

Ann Arbor recently approved a parks and greenbelt proposal to limit sprawl by buying land in the surrounding suburbs. The proposal would raise \$85 million to preserve 7,000 acres of the best open space in and around the city. Ann Arbor Mayor John Hieftje said the policy would give the city an "edge" over other places that compete for businesses and young residents.

This land preservation policy is a milestone for Michigan, said Gene Townsend, a builder of environmentally friendly homes in Lansing. But Townsend says fighting urban sprawl in Lansing is more difficult than in Ann Arbor or Grand Rapids, where a viable urban core has been preserved.

Townsend, whose family moved to Okemos in 1959, recalls how as a boy he went to see the circus every summer on undeveloped property, not far from a natural pond that was ideal for ice skating. Today, this land it is a Meijer's mega-strip mall paved with a large asphalt parking lot that is typical of urban sprawl.

The green builder said that if city planners really cared, they wouldn't build large roads 10 feet away from residential areas, as happens so often in the area. He believes urban revitalization can happen, but only if there is a collective approach to limiting sprawl and growth. "It won't be a single step. A group consciousness is the result of many small steps." And Townsend has taken one of these steps himself.

After a several-month search for a perfect location for their "urban village," he and a dozen urban renewal activists now own a cluster of five houses, which were vacant, for rent, and for sale, on Bancroft Court in Lansing's inner-city Genesee Neighborhood. Although each home is separate, members will have access to a common building, where optional communal meals, a community library, meeting rooms and rooms for childcare are available. They've transformed the courtyard, which was originally paved for parking, into a green field with walkways, and a playground and a vegetable garden.

The Grand Rapids example

Grand Rapids Mayor John Logie is also an outspoken supporter of "smart growth," the kind of growth that fights traffic congestion, economic segregation, offers more affordable housing and infuses a sense of community. "The longer people spend in traffic, the less likely they are to be involved in their community and family," Logie said in a recent interview with WKAR radio.

In 2001, Grand Rapids embraced new planning principles by rewriting its master plan. The city held more than 100 public meetings to solicit comments, ideas and opinions from local residents about planning, sprawl and how land use could be improved. The meetings included nearly 3,000 people in the planning process. Among the ideas written into the master plan was the recognition that people have the right to exist in a healthy, supportive, naturally diverse and sustainable environment. Another principle is the understanding that decisions about how things look and where they are built have consequences on human well-being, natural eco systems, and our ability to coexist with our environment. A third principle stresses the need to design buildings and communities that have long-term value. Future generations should not be burdened with maintenance, danger, damage and waste because of careless design.

Grand Rapids partners with neighboring townships and cities to design and construct water and sewer services in a way that guides new growth into existing communities, reducing the costly work of continuously expanding and extending roads and new utilities.

Logie argues that property rights advocates aren't right when they ask for the unlimited rights to develop their properties. "What if one person's development decision adversely impacts another's property, or the whole neighborhood?" Logie asked.

In the 1970s, Logie, who will retire this year after 12 years in office, helped write a state law allowing local governments to set up historic districts. Today there are 1,839 historic properties in Grand Rapids, 716 in East Lansing, and 28 in Lansing.

Logie also helped write a state law, creating Renaissance Zones in inner cities, where businesses and residents could get tax breaks for remodeling old buildings. Grand Rapids now has seven Renaissance Zones □ Lansing has one. The city also changed the zoning of several old warehouses, to encourage mixed use and attract suburban residents back to the cities. Retail stores, restaurants, offices and apartments were allowed to exist in the same building.

The most recent plan under debate, the so-called Metropolitan Rebate, would allow the metropolitan area's 47 different units of local government □ which together spend over \$650 million a year □ to voluntarily consolidate essential services and reduce individual operating budgets. The mayor expects this to free up over \$30 million in taxpayer money.

Carrying out the plan will first need the agreement of those 47 jurisdictions and a new state law that makes such intramural cooperation legal.

What the state is doing

The state of Michigan isn't far away from pushing land use reforms, following the urging of Michigan's Land Use Leadership Council for greater cooperation among local governments. Urban sprawl opponents expect Granholm to issue an executive order. During the 2002 gubernatorial campaign, Granholm promised to build a stronger state economy by curbing sprawl. After her inauguration in January she used the state's severe deficit to negotiate with the Republican-led Legislature and cut 17 expensive road-building projects.

Thus, Michigan follows a nationwide trend against urban sprawl. In just the past two years, there have been 13 gubernatorial executive orders addressing the issues of growth and development, Patricia E. Salkin, director of the Government Law Center of Albany Law School, said.

Keith Schneider, a program coordinator for the Michigan Land Use Institute in Beulah, said that Grand Rapids is in better shape than Lansing because there's a "very collaborative and long-standing business community."

Mayor David Hollister did a "miraculous job" to revitalize Lansing, said Schneider, given that downtown Lansing looked like a ghost town in the late 1980s. He believes that the bottom of decline due to sprawl has been reached, and that places like Grand Rapids, Lansing and even Detroit are reviving.

Schneider is enthusiastic about the Granholm administration's plan to provide people more choices, to revitalize their neighborhoods, send their kids to a decent schools, walk to work, and own just one car, if they wish. He lamented that unfortunately "there are no walkable communities in Lansing."

This is not so in Grand Rapids, where municipal neighbors and the city government have united around the region's transit service, which takes people to work and children to school, relieves traffic congestion and reduces air pollution. The bus system, known as the Interurban Transit Partnership, is so popular that residents on Nov. 4 voted to boost funding for the second time in three years.

Township troubles

Wyckoff calls the case of Grand Rapids a "work in progress" because it doesn't deal with all aspects of public service or growth and participation is voluntary. "Compared to similar situations in other states, it's a long way from ideal," said Wyckoff. He mentioned the more progressive example of Indianapolis, where county and city merged their governments.

Wyckoff said that the large number of political jurisdictions is the root cause of sprawl. There are more than 1,800

local units of planning and zoning in Michigan, which is five times greater than the average. "Each one looks at the world as if it ends at their borders. With no statutory obligation to coordinate land use decisions on a multi-jurisdictional basis, there is no incentive for them to do anything differently."

The most sprawled areas in Lansing border the so-called "nine-township area" of Watertown, Dewitt, Bath, Delta, Lansing, Meridian, Windsor, Delhi, and Alameda townships.

A vicious circle begins with increased development. While growing townships benefit from additional revenues due to incoming property taxes, they aren't obliged to pay the necessary public service costs for police, fire, sewer, storm drains and roads, which come into growth. Township residents also pay fewer taxes than city residents, whereas cities continue to lose tax revenues due to increased urban flight.

Passing land-use laws that weigh the interests of city and township residents will be a difficult task for lawmakers, said Wyckoff, particularly due to large regional differences. To illustrate the problem, the planner mentioned the fact that Ann Arbor was the only Michigan city where population has been increasing in the last 10 years. To mark a sharp contrast, Detroit's population has dropped below 1 million. Residents are paying very high taxes, however, because the city's water utilities and sewer were built to accommodate 2.2 million people in 1955, when the city had 1.825 million residents. "You can't lose half of your population, and have an infrastructure designed for more than twice your population, without having high taxes," said Wyckoff. Lansing, he said, is somewhere in the middle.

The role of city government

David Wiener, executive assistant to Lansing's Mayor Tony Benavides, said he realizes Grand Rapids has made great progress in fighting urban sprawl and that Lansing could go further. Lansing is working with other agencies in the tri-county area on economic development as well as mental health and senior programs, he pointed out.

Lansing already has some mutual aid agreements with the surrounding townships, but the city hasn't taken the next step to "formalize those relationships in a big picture." During Benavides' first year in office, Wiener said, he focused on dealing with budget problems, housing and economic development issues. Broadening regional planning will most likely become a priority in the next year or two. "It took [former Mayor] David Hollister one year before he began to broaden his vision and look regionally. I think Benavides is going through the same process," he said.

The mayor's executive aide said Benavides continues to support a blue ribbon committee for downtown revitalization, which Hollister started in the late 1990s.

These efforts are beginning to pay off, Wiener said. The fact that developers have most recently finished 30 lofts on Washington Avenue has much to do with the city's incentive program for urban renewal, he said. Loft developers don't have to pay property taxes for six years, under the city's neighborhood enterprise zone program.

Wiener said that even though lofts and more affordable housing are key to drawing people downtown, the city needs to create additional points of attraction, to generate an effect similar to the one Oldsmobile Park on Michigan Avenue brought. A 2001 plan to build a performing arts center is still on the table, he said, but funding is a problem due to the state's dramatic budget deficit. There are also competing interests, because the Lansing Center would like to expand its facility to compete with Grand Rapids' new convention center. "The director of the convention center is very anxious to have us make that a priority," he said.

Reflecting on the 30 years he's lived in Lansing, the Philadelphia native said he is quite optimistic about the city's potential to turn things around. Wiener recalls how the initial goal in 1993 was to save downtown Lansing. Back then, Hollister used the expression that one could "shoot a cannon on the streets and would not hit anybody." Ten years later, this is no longer the case. More than a dozen restaurants, and half a dozen shops are open after 5 p.m. and on the weekends. The quality of life in downtown Lansing has improved. Now Wiener himself would like to take regional cooperation one step further. At the next meeting of area city managers, Wiener wants to address the issue of increased regional cooperation. "I believe the time is right that we're talking about that."

Green commuting

Patrick Hudson, who directs the environmental think tank Urban Options in East Lansing, believes that creating walkable communities is the key to urban renewal. "But right now, cars come first," he said. Even people living

close to their workplaces, who could easily leave their car at home, take it because bike lanes or sidewalks don't exist or are designed in an inconvenient fashion.

Earlier this year, the State Energy Office, part of the Consumer and Industry Services Department (which Hollister heads) awarded Urban Options a grant to explore green transportation options in the Greater Lansing area. During a public seminar in May 2003, 50 area residents gathered to discuss car sharing, bicycle commuting, bus routes and calculating the true costs of car ownership. Representatives from the Mid-Michigan Environmental Action Council, League of Michigan Bicyclists, Rails to Trails Conservancy, Michigan Environmental Council, East Lansing Transportation Commission, and Michigan Department of Transportation joined the seminar.

After another brainstorming session, the group proposed a five-year plan to accomplish their goals.

Among their more than 30 concrete action steps, the group suggested linking all communities by a system of public transportation, walkways and bicycle paths, so that one can travel from Williamston to Grand Ledge safely without a car. They also suggested creating a bus or light rail line connecting Old Town, downtown and Michigan State University. The state government could sponsor a "Live Near Your Work" program to provide downpayments on homes that are brought near the workplaces and giving tax abatements to residents without a car.

The group also discussed problems related to the design of existing trails, referring to cases where sidewalks or bike lanes suddenly end, such as a sidewalk on Saginaw at Frandor's that ends at a keystone.

Walking from Michigan State University to Frandor's is in fact a nightmare (this reporter has experience), especially when crossing Michigan Avenue, which doesn't have a single pedestrian crossing point for more than one mile.

The group headed by Urban Options suggest revitalizing Frandor by creating green islands in the "current sea of concrete," accommodating pedestrian and bike traffic, and creating more bus stops. They also want to build bike lanes on Michigan Avenue, and prohibit "yet another mall developed further out from Lansing."

In order to accomplish their goal of supporting non-motorized traffic, the green commuting group suggests a public relations campaign, that would include billboards and ads promoting the advantages of driving less ("Keep Dollars Local") and hosting educational events.

Preserving open space

Just how common is the tendency of elected local leaders to break their own planning laws? A recent study prepared by Joan Guy, the former chairwoman of the Planning Commission in Meridian Township, east of Lansing, found that Jan. 1, 1997, to May 3, 2000 it was not infrequent. According to the study, Meridian Township rezoned 627 acres of land, much of it from residential to commercial uses. Of the 44 requests for rezoning, 37 were approved. And of those 37, a full 27, or 61 percent, violated the township's own master plan, which sets as one of its highest priorities the preservation of neighborhoods and residential areas.

Community involvement can change such a pattern quickly, however. In November 2000, Anne Woiwode, program director of the 17,000-member Michigan chapter of the Sierra Club, was one of five new leaders whom voters in Ingham County's Meridian Township elected to replace a pro-development township board. The cautious-growth board replaced the anything-goes board elected 15 years ago.

Three years before Ann Arbor's Greenbelt project, in 2000, Meridian voters approved a land preservation plan to preserve open green spaces and special natural features. The cost □ 0.75 of a mill for 10 years requires the owner of a \$100,000 home to pay \$37.50 more a year in property taxes.

Meridian Township Clerk Mary Helmbrecht said that the township has thus far preserved 90 acres. The township recently accepted a donation of a 58-acre parcel located west of Okemos Road and south of Burcham Drive. The township, which has \$2 million in its preservation fund, is negotiating with landowners to acquire 200 more acres in the next few months.

The township planning department estimates that Meridian has approximately 6,200 acres of undeveloped land remaining, in addition to wetlands protected under conservancy laws. Meridian has also adopted a "Greenspace project" to provide a network of green spaces that will protect and connect valued natural and cultural resources for

pedestrian and bike traffic.

Meridian's pathways millage, which has existed for 18 years, provided \$250,000 annually for the construction of pedestrian and cycling paths along roadways. Thus far the township has installed 57 miles of trails.

Last winter the township hired Greenway Collaborative Inc., from Ann Arbor, to help them develop a greenspace plan, which the company recently presented. The long-term plan suggests making the township walkable by connecting the green spaces around major parks, schools, adjacent communities, Michigan State University and commercial centers and even linking the new nature paths into Lansing's River Trail.

The rise of the creative class

On Dec. 11, Granholm is hosting a "cool cities" conference at the Lansing Center, bringing cultural, economic development and community leaders together to discuss sprawl-related challenges in Michigan. The event features Carnegie Mellon University professor Richard Florida, author of the 2002 book "The Rise of the Creative Class," to discuss the revitalization of Michigan cities.

The book's appeal to young urban professionals seems to match Granholm's goal to retrofit Michigan cities so they can attract a skilled workforce, while at the same time stopping residents from leaving.

Florida has created a "creativity index," which compares the potential of metropolitan areas to attract professionals. Interestingly, in Florida's study the Greater Lansing area ranks seventh out of 63 regions with 250,000 to 500,000 residents.

Wiener said he feels "reaffirmed" by the positive result.

The percentage of gay and lesbian residents in the area positively influenced the ranking in Florida's study. Wiener pointed out that the 48912 zip code in Lansing is said to have the second largest concentration of lesbians in the United States, with San Francisco ranking first. Lansing also offers a strong higher education system and serves as a regional high-tech hub for the area.

But the creativity index doesn't take urban sprawl into account.

Ron Whitmore, the director of the Northwest Lansing Healthy Neighborhoods Initiative, said he was surprised about the good ranking. "I always felt that Lansing has everything it needs," Whitmore said, "but it also has this kind of 'stuckness' about it. There seems to be something that keeps preventing it from taking the next step. I'm not sure what that is."

Wyckoff, who read the research results with "big eyes," said that the positive rating could be explained by the tri-county area's stable work environment, a considerable amount of high-tech firms, Michigan State University and the auto industry, as well as cultural offerings in East Lansing. But given the book's list of criteria, Lansing wouldn't even come close to Ann Arbor. Interestingly, the study contains no data on Ann Arbor.

Added Wyckoff: "When you create an index, you frequently get anomalies. This might just be one."

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